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SUBJECT: GOT DECISION-MAKING: CLEAR AS MUD

REF: 07 TUNIS 1489

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (S/NF) As expected in a country with one leader for 20 years, key government decisions in Tunisia are made by President Ben Ali. What is unusual is that few officials, including the most senior, seem to know the process by which Ben Ali makes decisions or who has influence over him. Rumors and speculation are rife, but facts are few. As a consequence, most officials in the GOT bureaucracy are unwilling to take any independent action or offer any substantive response on policy matters. Whether they are simply cut out of policy making process, or deliberately selected because of their natural reluctance to question the system, it is no wonder the pace of reform in Tunisia is glacial. The system limits Tunisia's ability to respond to the country's own challenges and prevents the GOT from engaging on the full range of bilateral issues. End Summary.

THE BUCK STOPS HERE

¶2. (S/NF) From speed bumps to employment, President Ben Ali issues instructions for every government activity, as is trumpeted daily in government-owned and private media. Senior GOT officials may receive instructions from Ben Ali, but they rarely sit in on Ben Ali's official meetings. In bilateral discussions with US officials, the President is only joined by an interpreter (usually Director of the Tunisian External Communication Agency Oussama Romdhani) when needed. By limiting access to information, Ben Ali maintains exclusive control and makes the system opaque to prevent others from influencing -- or questioning -- decision-making. While the most powerful ministers (see below) may acknowledge having engaged President Ben Ali personally about a particular issue, or note there are "differing opinions" on the speed of reform, most can only repeat generic policy rhetoric from Ben Ali's speeches.

¶3. (S/NF) Although President Ben Ali conducts weekly Cabinet meetings, most Tunisians believe that the "shadow cabinet" at the Presidential Palace has the most influence on key policies. This "shadow cabinet" includes approximately 20 presidential advisors with portfolios that sometimes mirror state ministries (e.g., Education, Social Affairs) and others who are only identified as "Presidential Attaches." In fact, the Presidency seems to be organized somewhat like an

expanded US National Security Council. Minister of State Abdelaziz Ben Dhia acts as the National Security Advisor-equivalent and is widely believed to be the most influential official in Tunisia. The rest of the officials who staff the presidency seem to direct and coordinate policy decisions more than influence actual decision-making.

¶4. (S/NF) Senior ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party officials, particularly key party activists from the Bourguiba era such as RCD Vice President Hamad Karoui, also seem to have some direct influence on presidential decisions.

However, some observers believe Karoui and others of his generation have more symbolic influence than actual leverage on the President. Further, Presidency and RCD officials' interactions with Ben Ali are largely hidden from the public eye, so rumors abound about who is influential and why officials are appointed or removed. Many Tunisians fear that, behind the palace walls, Ben Ali's wife Leila is exerting insidious influence on government policies. Rumors abound that Leila is using her position to obtain favors, particularly related to business matters, for her extended Trabelsi clan. Ben Ali's second wife is widely despised in Tunisia as a usurper, and many fear that her influence on Ben Ali may be part of a grander scheme to become president herself one day (reftel).

THE SOVEREIGN FEW

¶5. (S/NF) Outside of the President's inner circle, there are five "sovereign" ministries (Prime Ministry, Interior, Defense, Foreign Affairs and Justice) that technically report directly to the President. However, only three -- Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah, and Minister of Interior Rafik Belhaj Kacem -- appear to have regular access to President Ben Ali. Justice and Defense officially report to the President, but seem to have more limited access and mandates. PM Ghannouchi, a technocrat who manages the affairs of the 21 remaining "technical" ministries, meets regularly with Ben Ali to report on GOT achievements and receive instructions about new policies. It is unclear how detailed these meetings are, but few believe that Ben Ali has the vision or knowledge to direct technical affairs. Rather, Ghannouchi is almost universally respected for his savvy management of government affairs and most believe he is personally responsible for Tunisia's sustained economic growth and development. His long history of government service (Ben Ali selected him for Prime Minister in 1999 and has kept him through numerous cabinet reshuffles) is indicative of Ghannouchi's success.

¶6. (S/NF) In comparison, the Foreign Minister and Interior Minister both joined the cabinet relatively recently (2005 and 2004, respectively) after long stints as presidential advisors in Carthage. As the President was once Minister of Interior himself and is often derided as a uneducated policeman, most Tunisians believe Ben Ali personally approves all matters of state security. However, Minister of Interior Belhaj Kacem makes little reference to Ben Ali and it has been our observation that the most powerful officials are those who invoke Ben Ali the least. Unsurprisingly, the Minister and his ministry are the most opaque in Tunisia and, while many rumors exist, those in the know are silent about the internal decision-making process. More broadly, however, Tunisians fear of the MOI's reach leads many to believe that the majority of decisions are influenced by the security services.

¶7. (S/NF) Foreign Minister Abdallah is the most vocal about his interactions with President Ben Ali and often shares with us that he has consulted with the President, or been advised by the President, regarding a particular issue. For example, days before his June 2007 visit to Washington, Abdallah told the Ambassador that he had yet to discuss with Ben Ali the priorities for the visit -- and therefore could not tell the Ambassador on what he hoped to focus. Abdallah, who has worked closely with Ben Ali since the early 1980s, seems to

enjoy a wide mandate domestically and is believed to be personally responsible for imposing the increasingly stifling controls at the MFA (septel). However, there is little to indicate he has significant influence over foreign policy direction. Inside the Ministry, Abdallah has surrounded himself with a few key staff members, leaving most career officials in the dark about policy decisions.

ADRIFT ON THE SHIP OF STATE

18. (S/NF) Beyond the sovereign three, most Tunisian officials seem to be combing Ben Ali's speeches for clues on what policy direction they should take. In meetings, the timid regurgitate Ben Ali's words rather than offer substantive policy information. As Ben Ali's speeches seem to be prepared in the Presidential Palace, GOT officials are often scrambling to bring laws or policies into compliance with Ben Ali's announcements. One Prime Ministry official -- a quasi GOT-wide staff assistant -- maintains a database of all Ben Ali guidance in speeches, directives and meetings, which serves as reference of official policies and ensures laws and regulations comply with Ben Ali's announcements.

19. (S/NF) The 22 non-sovereign ministers, who report directly to the Prime Minister, may launch new initiatives that are in accordance with presidential directives. Thus, a few officials take Ben Ali's public statements as direct policy guidance and take action accordingly. One senior economic official explained, "President Ben Ali announced in a speech that the protection of international property rights was a priority. Then I received a Presidential medal. So I knew that I had the authority to create legislation that was in accordance with the President's speech." However, some officials believe that the safest course is taking no action. One private sector contact lamented that Tunisia has "real ministers" who are competent technocrats, but do not feel empowered to take independent decisions.

COMMENT

110. (S/NF) Bureaucratic paralysis may be one way the regime maintains control over the country. If officials lack empowerment, nothing can happen without high-level approval. But the system has become increasingly catatonic, and Tunisians note that the GOT is undertaking little relevant reform. Similarly, the system limits Tunisia's ability to engage on the full range of bilateral issues with the USG. While many officials tell us Ben Ali has a "plan" for political reform, no one has ever indicated they have even a vague idea of what this plan entails. Prime Minister Ghannouchi has successfully maintained steady economic growth over the past decade, but there are indications Tunisia's top-down system is struggling to adjust to a globalized world. Worse, those who realize that Tunisia must move faster to respond to the growing pressures of unemployment and extremism seem unable to effect real change. While these pressures build gradually, it is unclear how destabilizing any real shock -- like the death of President Ben Ali -- to the system would be. End Comment.

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